

In thirty years of hearing about blackjack advantage play, including card counting, hole-carding, ace-tracking, shuffle-tracking and just about everything else, I had thought I'd heard it all. But a man and woman who'd met while dealing blackjack in the same Lake Tahoe casino, and who'd quit their jobs about the same time they got married, blew my mind when I heard their story.

She was Brandy; he was Randy. Brandy had expensive tastes; so did Randy. She liked driving around in convertible sports cars. He liked racing Harleys and fancied owning the best of them. Another thing they had in common was enjoying a challenge, so when Randy proposed to Brandy that they give up their dealing jobs to make a living counting cards, she agreed with a toast that they would never again go back behind a blackjack table.

The year was 2001 when they set about their new careers. Counting opportunities were still out there but not easy pickings for a two-person team. They basically employed the typical counter/big player strategy and alternated roles depending on conditions and which of them had less heat in the pits. They also used psychology when making that decision. As Brandy was a hot-looking blonde, she played the role of a high-rolling lady blackjack player when the pits were staffed with younger guys on the make. When the old-timers were on duty it was Randy making the big bets after Brandy signaled him to hot tables. They worked efficiently and made a decent if not spectacular living. In fact, their combined yearly earnings the first few years were about what they would have been had they stayed in Lake Tahoe dealing. But they both liked the freedom of working when they wanted and not having to deal with the casino bullshit. They worked primarily in Nevada, Mississippi and Atlantic City, with occasional jaunts through Minnesota and other Midwest destinations.

But one late night in the summer of 2005 they were no longer your run-of-the-mill card-counting duo. First to notice this was the staff at a major Las Vegas Strip casino. It was the graveyard shift and

the casino had emptied out. The pair sat at the table alone. They had arrived together and specifically requested that no other players be permitted entry to their blackjack table. As it was late and there were plenty of other tables, the bosses did not object. The dealer offered Brandy the cut-card and shuffled up. After the shuffle he held the six-deck pack in his hand on the layout, waiting for her to insert the cut card. But Brandy hesitated as though deciding where in the pack to place it, as if searching for her lucky spot. Finally she inserted the card and the dealer loaded the pack into the shoe. The floor man was mildly surprised when they each placed four purple \$500 chips in their betting circles. Randy, who sat at first base, received a blackjack. Brandy was dealt a hard 17 and stood. The dealer drew to a stiff but made 19. Randy won \$3,000 for his blackjack while Brandy lost \$2,000; together they cleared a grand.

If the floor man was mildly surprised by their initial bet, he was totally shocked by their next bet. They each placed three red \$5 chips in their betting circles, \$15 bets, which was the table minimum. They won their hands. Then on the third round they stayed at \$15 bets. They continued betting \$15 on each of their hands until the dealer went through four and a half decks and reached the cut card he'd placed into the pack before loading the cards into the shoe. The floor man had called over the pit boss and notified him about their strange betting pattern. It wasn't every day you saw someone bet two grand at the top of a six-deck shoe and then settle into a pattern of minimum bets for the twenty-five remaining hands. They stood and watched as the dealer offered the cut card to Randy and then shuffled up. Randy deliberately inserted it into the pack, then the dealer loaded the six decks into the shoe. The first round, Brandy played two hands, each at \$2,000. Randy, at first base, played just one, but his bet was also \$2,000. The floor man and pit boss shot each other a curious glance, the pit boss with a furrowed brow. They watched Randy hit his 14 into the dealer's ten and bust. But Brandy's first hand was a blackjack. Her second hand of twenty pushed with the dealer's. So with Brandy's blackjack, the pair won another \$1,000 on the round. What would they bet next?

This time the floor man and pit boss were not stunned when they watched them revert to \$15 bets. Brandy stayed at two hands, Randy one. They played out the entire shoe without varying from the \$15 bet. It was stupefying to watch them go right back up to two grand a hand the first round of the next shoe. This was the third consecutive time they had done it. What were they doing? The floor man and pit boss wondered. Were they playing some crazy hunch that they thought made them lucky each first round of a shoe? Somehow neither the floor man nor the pit boss thought that, although they again watched the couple make money on the round. This time no blackjacks, but Randy did receive a winning hard twenty at first base, while Brandy's hand pushed. It was a \$2,000 profit. After playing out the rest of that shoe at \$15 a hand, they began the fourth shoe with



The Blackest Pair of Jacks

Richard Marcus returns with an astounding tale of blackjack bravado.

The bosses are all baffled.

The casino manager had been informed and he quickly got surveillance involved. "What the hell are they doing?"

the same \$2,000 bets—but with a twist. This time Brandy did not bet. Randy's \$2000 wager lay alone. And it lost. His 17 lost to the dealer's twenty. The floor man and pit boss exchanged a small smile and began to relax a bit.

Maybe they shouldn't have. By dawn, after a total of ten shoes, the pair had beaten the blackjack table for \$15,000, winning all that money on the first rounds of new shoes. When Brandy and Randy returned the next night, again after midnight, and asked to play at the same table and alone, they were immediately accommodated, but this time they had an audience. The floor man and pit boss from the night before were joined by two more pit bosses and the shift boss. To say they were all curious would be the understatement of the year. But their presence did not seem to bother Brandy and Randy. They played as they had the previous night, making \$2,000 bets off the top of the shoe, playing either one, two or three hands. The table limit was \$5,000. Although after getting ahead \$25,000 they stepped up their off-the-top bets to \$3,000, they did not venture the maximum bet, another curiosity as far as the casino's personnel were concerned.

But that changed after a week of play. At that point they had beaten this lone casino for more than a hundred grand! They now upped their first-round bets to the maximum \$5,000, playing one, two or three hands. When they played the third hand, there was no apparent pattern for which of them played two. The only discernible pattern was that Brandy and Randy, who of course were using phony names, kept on winning with their miraculous top-of-the-shoe bets. The bosses were all baffled. The casino manager had been informed and he quickly got surveillance involved. "What the hell are they doing!" he demanded of the surveillance director, who knew off the bat that it couldn't be card counting as no viable advantage could possibly be obtained coming off the first round of a six-deck shoe. "How are they beating us every day by betting heavy on only the first round of blackjack?"

The surveillance director and his staff got right to work. Their first assumption was that the couple were tracking aces and tens during the shuffle and then using the cut card to steer these cards to come out on the first round of the new shoe. With the knowledge of your first card being an ace, you had a whopping 52% advantage against the house. Knowing your first card was a ten gave you a 13% advantage. By playing multiple hands off the top, you virtually guaranteed your target card's arrival to one of your hands. If that card were an ace, you would gladly play two additional hands at a 1% disadvantage (assuming basic strategy) to garner the 52% edge on your first one.

But examination of the surveillance video of their play revealed that all the dealers on the game were shuffling thoroughly, leaving little chance for accurate shuffle-tracking play. In addition, the casino's dealing policy called for a "slug-mixing" procedure before

the dealers even took the played cards out of the discard rack to begin the new shuffle. This was the action of interspersing three clumps of cards within the six-deck pack to confuse shuffle trackers looking to identify any slug (small pack of cards) of high cards they might have observed during play. So surveillance dismissed shuffle-tracking and again began wondering what the "lucky" couple were doing. "Maybe they found some new kind of card counting system," one of the surveillance operators suggested desperately. "But then why would they only make big bets off the top of the shoe?" the director countered. "The count can't be true positive the first round of a new shoe?" The operator simply shrugged that he didn't know.

In spite of the director's dismissal of card counting, he suggested to the casino manager that they institute an anti-counting measure against the couple anyway. The next night they came into the casino, the manager instructed the dealers to cut off three of the six decks, reducing the penetration level to 50%. This did not bother Brandy and Randy in the least. They smiled as they cut the cards and continued beating the hell out of the casino, up another \$100,000 in three days. Irate, the manager ordered the dealers to deal only one deck to them, cutting off five decks of cards. Randy grinned at the manager as the dealer followed the instruction and burned five out of six decks. Both he and Brandy continued betting \$5,000 per hand on the first round, then \$15 on the three or four rounds remaining before the new shuffle. They continued winning. The manager's next move was to up the minimum bet at the table to \$100. Then \$500. With a maximum bet only ten times the minimum, their feathers would surely be ruffled.

Not so. They still kept winning money on the first rounds. Finally, and perhaps the biggest anti-advantage-play measure ever taken by a casino short of tossing players, the casino ordered the dealers to perform the comical task of shuffling after every hand! Imagine shuffling a six-deck shoe after every hand! This was insane! But Brandy and Randy seemed to love it, and they continued winning like crazy. After two weeks they had beaten the casino for half a million dollars, after three close to a million. Finally the distraught surveillance director reported to the casino manager that he couldn't figure out what they were doing to beat the game. Then, at an emergency management meeting, it was decided to hire an outside consultant, one who was considered an expert in all forms of blackjack advantage play as well as cheating.

The expert examined hours of video footage of the couple's play. The first unusual thing he noticed was that Brandy and Randy had the same habit when it came to placing the cut card into the pack after the shuffle. They both hesitated while the dealer held the pack on the layout, taking several seconds before inserting the card. With his nose squarely to the screen, he also noticed that they seemed to be placing the cut card into the pack in front of cards whose edges appeared slightly darker than other cards, and he added

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that observation to the evidence that they received an inordinate amount of first-card aces and tens on first rounds off the top of the shoe. Then when he examined the video for the umpteenth time, he noticed something that triggered a startling reaction in his brain: the longer the dealer held the pack before the cards were cut, the more dark edges of cards appeared. What was astounding about this was that upon close physical inspection of those cards in his hands, there were no dark ridges or anything else unusual when compared to any other played decks in the casino. But on the video these dark edges remained absolutely visible.

It was the expert's turn to be baffled. But then he compared the videos of the cards used on Brandy and Randy's table to videos of cards used on other tables. Dark edges were found on some of the cards used on other tables, but not on all of them. Then he studied the video of cards used on Brandy and Randy's table that were pulled after just two shoes. He noticed something curious: some of the cards had dark edges but they were not quite as dark. Then he had those same cards re-inserted into the game, and upon examining the video of them two shoes later, some of the edges had become darker. The same experiment panned out on some other tables as well. All this led the expert to conclude that the cards were somehow defective and that the couple had picked up on the defect to beat the house. Since the darkened edges were predominantly on aces and tens, they placed the cut card one card in front of either an ace or ten so that the desired card would fall into one of their hands after the dealer burned a single card to start the new shoe. It was simply genius.

But, lo and behold, the expert was not completely right. Upon a fully-fledged inspection of the card company's printing facility and produced playing cards, no defective cards or equipment was found. Management of the company was very concerned about the incident tarnishing its reputation, thus they wanted to get to the bottom of this as well. The expert went back to the surveillance footage and his mind hovered over the couple's hesitation each time they inserted the cut card. Why did they do this? Every single time! Finally, he thought he had the answer. The dark edges did not appear until several seconds after the dealer offered the pack from his extended arm. It was as if the couple knew this, like they were actually waiting for the dark edges to appear. But the expert knew from previous physical examination of the cards, which would be the same view the couple had of them on the table, that the discoloration was not visible. So then how was the location of the aces and tens coming to Brandy and Randy? They couldn't see the dark color along the edges, but obviously they saw *something*.

It took a second expert to finally solve the puzzle. Called in by the first, he chuckled in appreciation as he watched the video and realized what the couple had accomplished. "These two let your casino do all their work for them," he said to the dumbfounded

surveillance staff and casino manager. "Starting with the dealer." He explained how by hesitating to insert the cut card, the couple induced the dealers into relaxing their grips on the six-deck pack. When the dealer naturally did relax his grip, the cards separated, and what appeared as black lines on the two-dimensional surveillance tape imagery were actually bent cards whose slight corner bends created the space between those cards and the other cards not bent.

"But if the cards were not defective and the players never touched the cards, how did they get bent?" the confused casino manager asked. The second expert chuckled again and said, "You bent the cards for them." With more bemused expressions staring him in the face, the expert spared them any further agony. "What happens every time the dealers have a ten or an ace showing?" he asked them. Someone answered, "They have to check for blackjack." The expert nodded and then asked as if talking to a group of children, "And how do they do that?" Another responded, "They slide the cards into the hole-card reader," as if answering a stupid question. The expert shrugged. "Well, that's it! That's how the cards are being marked, or I should say bent." When they looked at him funnily, he told a surveillance operator to zoom in on the table Brandy and Randy were playing on.

They all watched intently as the dealer slid his ace and hole card into the reader, then flipped over the blackjack. "Did you notice how hard the dealer slid those cards into the reader?" the expert asked. They all nodded dumbly, then the expert explained that the dealers were sliding the cards into the reader much quicker and with more force than they normally did. Why? "Because the batteries are low, gentlemen. The dealers have to slide the cards in harder to activate the light telling them they have blackjack. That's how they're bending the cards, inadvertently, of course. The result is that the tens and aces are bent on one corner while non-tens-and-aces are bent on the laterally opposite corner. I suggest that you properly maintain your card readers and change their batteries before they start dying." He pointed at the couple on the monitor. "If not, that charming couple will take you to the cleaners!"

They already had, to the tune of \$2 million! And the amazing thing about it was that each time the casino took what they considered a deterring measure against them, it only added to their edge. By reducing the number of hands they dealt per shoe, the casino increased the number of shuffles, which gave Brandy and Randy that many more chances to steer tens and aces into their hands. When they finally decided to shuffle up an entire six-deck shoe after every hand, they played right into Brandy's and Randy's waiting hands.●

Talk about shooting yourself in the face!
Richard Marcus is author of *The World's Greatest Gambling Scams*, published by Undercover).

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